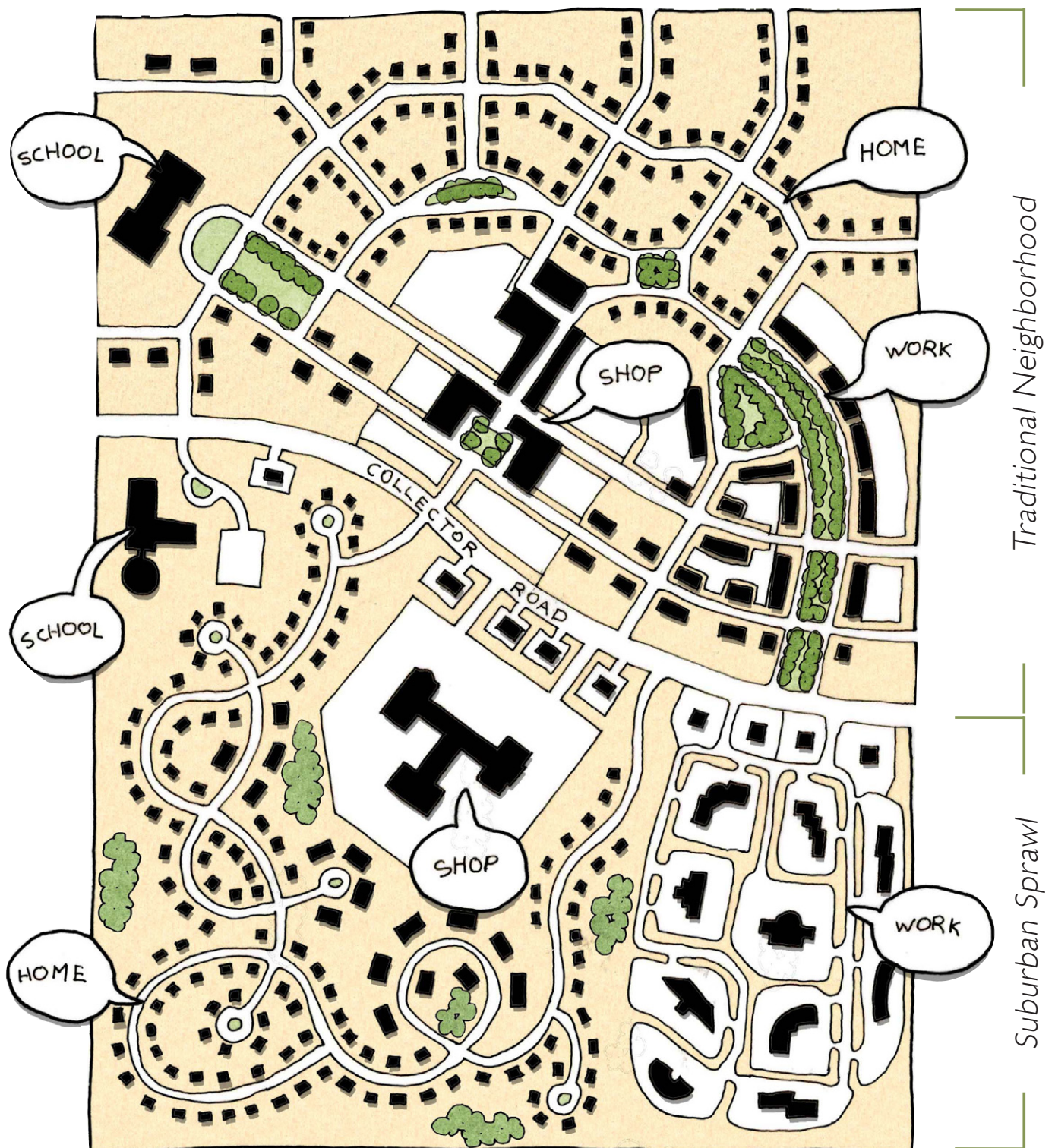


# THE TRADITIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD AND SUBURBAN SPRAWL



*Comparing the Physical Attributes, Consequences,  
Balance of Functions and Affordable Housing of Both*





## *Suburban Sprawl*

The congested, fragmented, unsatisfying suburban sprawl and the disintegrating urban centers of today are not merely products of laissez-faire nor the inevitable results of mindless greed. They are thoroughly planned to be as they are: the direct result of zoning and subdivision ordinances zealously administered by planning departments.

If the results are dismaying, it is because the model of the city being projected is dismal. These ordinances dictate three criteria for urbanism: the free and rapid flow of traffic, parking in quantity, and the rigorous separation of building use. The result of these criteria is that automobile traffic and its landscape have become the central, unavoidable experience of the public realm.

## *Traditional Neighborhood*

The traditional pattern of walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods has been inadvertently prohibited by current ordinances. Thus, designers find themselves in the ironic situation of being forbidden from building in the manner of our admired historic places. One cannot propose a new Annapolis, Marblehead or Key West without seeking substantial variances from current codes.

Thus, there are two types of urbanism available. The neighborhood, which was the model in North America from the first settlements to the second World War; and Suburban Sprawl, which has been the model since then. They are similar in their initial capacity to accommodate people and their activities; the principal difference is that Suburban Sprawl contains environmental, social, and economic deficiencies that inevitably choke sustained growth.



## The neighborhood has the following physical attributes:

- The Neighborhood is a comprehensive planning increment when clustered with others, it becomes a town; when standing free in the landscape, it becomes a village. The Neighborhood varies in population and density to accommodate localized conditions.
- The Neighborhood is limited in size so that a majority of the population is within a 5-minute walking distance of its center (1/4 mile). The needs of daily life are theoretically available within this area. This center provides an excellent location for a transit stop, convenience work places, retail, community events, and leisure activities.
- The streets are laid out in a network, so that there are alternate routes to most destinations. This permits most streets to be smaller with slower traffic as well as having parking, trees, sidewalks, and buildings. They are equitable for both vehicles and pedestrians.
- The streets are spatially defined by a wall of buildings that front the sidewalk in a disciplined manner, uninterrupted by parking lots.



- The buildings are diverse in function, but compatible in size and in disposition on their lots. There is a mixture of houses (large and small), outbuildings, small apartment buildings, shops, restaurants, offices, and warehouses.
- Civic buildings (schools, meeting halls, the-

aters, churches, clubs, museums, etc.) are often placed on squares or at the termination of street vistas. By being built at important locations, these buildings serve as landmarks.

- Open space is provided in the form of specialized squares, playgrounds, and parks and, in the case of villages, greenbelts.

## Suburban sprawl has quite different physical attributes:

- Sprawl is disciplined only by isolated “pods,” which are dedicated to single uses such as “shopping centers,” “office parks,” and “residential clusters”. All of these are inaccessible from each other except by car.

Housing is strictly segregated in large clusters containing units of similar cost, hindering socioeconomic diversity.

- Sprawl is limited only by the range of the automobile which easily forms catchment areas for retail, often exceeding 35 miles.



- There is a high proportion of cul-de-sacs and looping streets within each pod. Through traffic is possible only by means of a few “collector” streets which, consequently, become easily congested.
- Vehicular traffic controls the scale and form of space, with streets being wide and dedicated primarily to the automobile. Parking lots typically dominate the public space.
- Buildings are often highly articulated, rotated on their lots, and greatly set back from streets. They are unable to create spatial definition or sense of place. Civic buildings do not normally receive distinguished sites.
- Open space is often provided in the form of “buffers,” “pedestrian ways,” “berms,” and other ill-defined residual spaces.



## The neighborhood has several positive consequences:

- By bringing most of the activities of daily living into walking distance, everyone (especially the elderly and the young) gains independence of movement.
- By reducing the number and length of automobile trips, traffic congestion is minimized, the expenses of road construction are limited, and air pollution is reduced.
- By providing streets and squares of comfortable scale with defined spatial quality, neighbors, walking, can come to know each other and to watch over their collective security.
- By providing appropriate building concentrations at easy walking distances from transit stops, public transit becomes a viable alternative to the automobile.
- By providing a full range of housing types and work places, age and economic classes are integrated and the bonds of an authentic community are formed.



- By providing suitable civic buildings and spaces, democratic initiatives are encouraged and the balanced evolution of society is facilitated.
- By assuming that the people will drive to and from all activities, the need for large streets

and parking lots becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The exhaust emissions resulting from such trips are the single greatest source of air pollution in the United States.

## Suburban sprawl has several negative consequences:

- By the construction of an excessive asphaltic infrastructure, the natural landscape is destroyed. Each automobile not only generates roadways, but also requires a paved parking place at the dwelling, another at the work place, and yet another at the shopping center.
- By consigning the bulk of the available public budget to pay for asphaltic infrastructure, the human infrastructure of good schools, post offices, fire stations, meeting halls, cultural buildings, and affordable housing





**In a neighborhood, affordable housing occurs naturally and in a highly integrated manner. This is achieved by the following means:**

- The affordable housing looks like the market-rate housing, using similar exterior materials, windows, and building forms.
- Affordable housing is not segregated and is never clustered in large numbers. A good ratio is one affordable unit to ten market-rate units.
- Housing is provided above retail establishments. This type of dwelling can be provided for the cost of construction alone, because the cost of land can be assigned to the retail component of the building.
- Garage apartments or cottages are available in the backyards of single family houses. These rental units, of limited size, provide extremely affordable housing that is interspersed with market-rate housing. This also allows teenagers to stay at home and the elderly to live with their families.



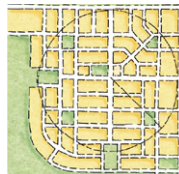
**However, in a neighborhood, proximity is not enough; the detailing of the public space to accommodate the pedestrian is also necessary:**

- Buildings must be aligned along streets and squares. The current fashion of staggering or rotating buildings hinders the creation of public space defined by the buildings.
- Trees along streets must also be aligned in a disciplined manner. This is particularly important to remedy spaces when over-large setbacks cannot be avoided. Picturesque planting patterns should be reserved for parks and squares, not for streets and avenues.
- Parallel parking must be provided on most streets. A layer of parked cars protects the pedestrians from traffic psychologically. Parking lots, when they are needed, should be placed to the rear of buildings to avoid the gaps that make sidewalks uninteresting to use. House lots, if less than fifty feet wide, should be provided with alleys so that garage doors do not overwhelm the street facades.
- At intersections, the radius at the curb should not exceed 15 feet. This maintains a viable pedestrian crossing distance and reduces the speed of automobiles making the turn.
- High capacity streets within urbanized areas should have the geometry of avenues, not of highways. Highways are unpleasant for pedestrians and deteriorate adjacent building value, while avenues are compatible with buildings and people. Highways should be reserved for the countryside and be built without strip development.



**Certain classes of citizens who suffer particularly from the pattern of suburban sprawl include:**

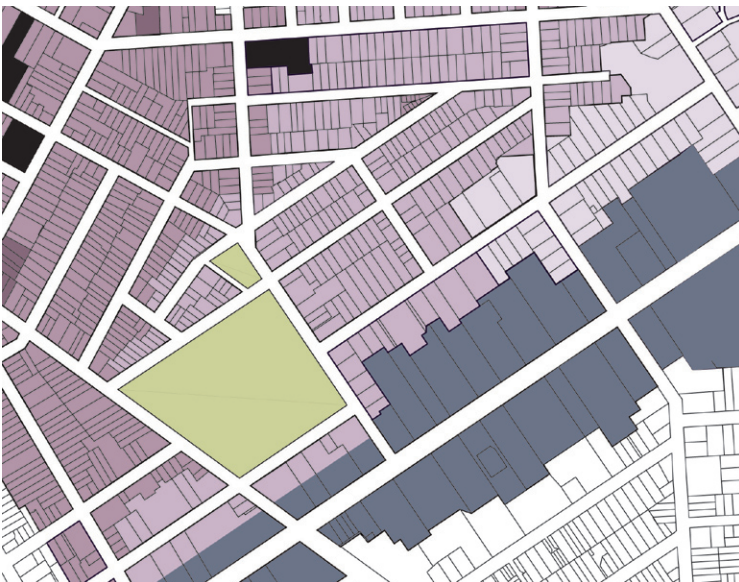
- The middle class, who are forced into multiple automobile ownership. The average yearly cost of car ownership is \$9,000, which is the equivalent of a \$90,000 mortgage payment. The possibility of owning one less car is the single most important subsidy that can be provided towards affordable housing. By forbidding mixed use areas, the investment of personal time in the activity of commuting is mandatory. A person who drives 2 hours a day spends the equivalent of 8 working weeks a year in the car.
- The young, below the legal driving age, who are dependent on adults for their social needs. They are bused to schools, from which they cannot walk, and isolated at home until their working parents arrive. The alternative is to relegate one parent to a career as the child's chauffeur. The single family house with the yard is a good place for childhood only if it is structured as part of a Neighborhood. Within these, the child can walk or bicycle to school, to play, to the store, to the movies, and to friends' houses.
- The elderly, who lose their self-sufficiency once they lose their drivers' licenses. Healthy seniors citizens who may continue to live independently within a Neighborhood are otherwise consigned to specialized retirement communities where their daily needs are met at great cost.



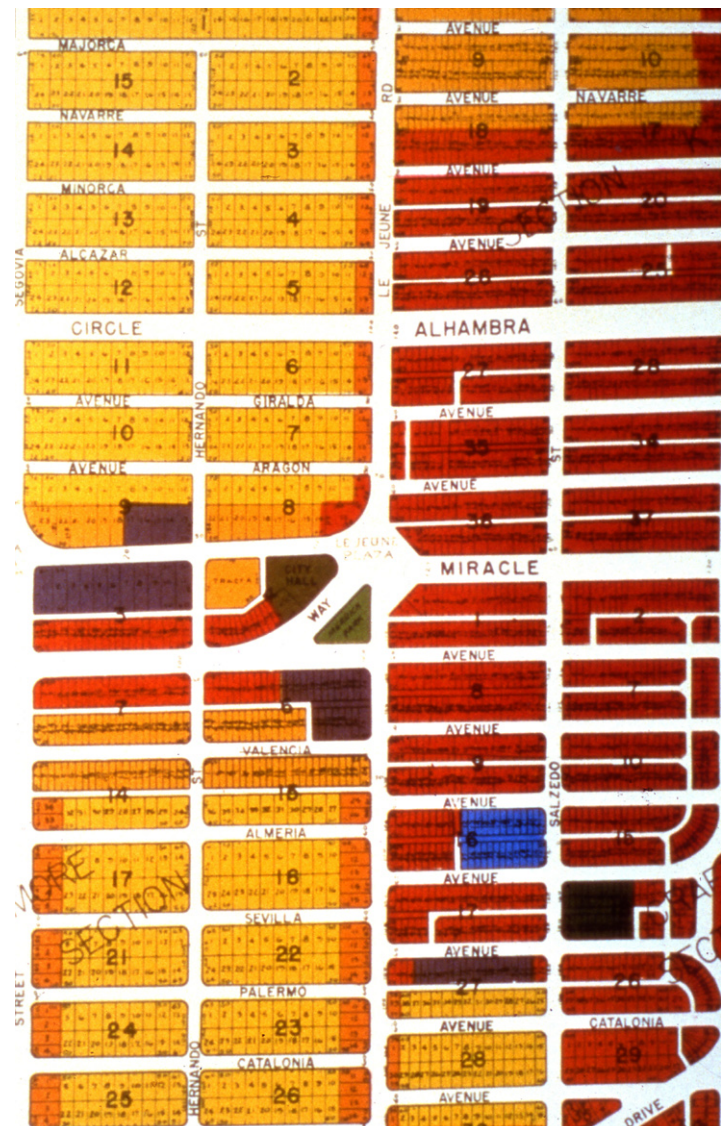
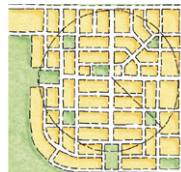




Current codes monitor only traffic flow, parking counts, the segregation of building use, and the safeguard of wetlands.



New codes must be written that include effective provisions for the neighborhood, which is the human habitat in all its complexity.



**DPZ**

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